



STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH FEMALE INMATES IN JAIL

Strategies for Working With Female Inmates

This training is the result of interviews and surveys completed by jail staff and female inmates in 12 Minnesota county jails across the state in 2006 and 2007. The training was developed by the Women Incarcerated at the Local Level (WILL) subcommittee of the Advisory Task Force on the Women and Juvenile Female Offender in Corrections.

Introduction

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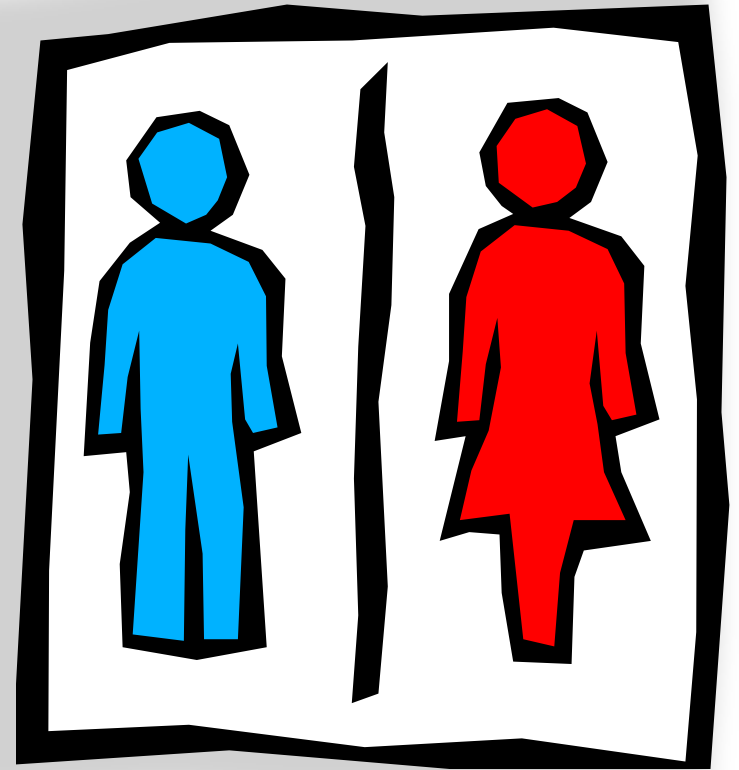


- ❖ The following slides will provide you with strategies and tips for working with female inmates, including research findings.
- ❖ The information is basic in that there is no “one size fits all” in working with female inmates.
- ❖ The presentation is approximately 30 minutes long.

Findings on Identity

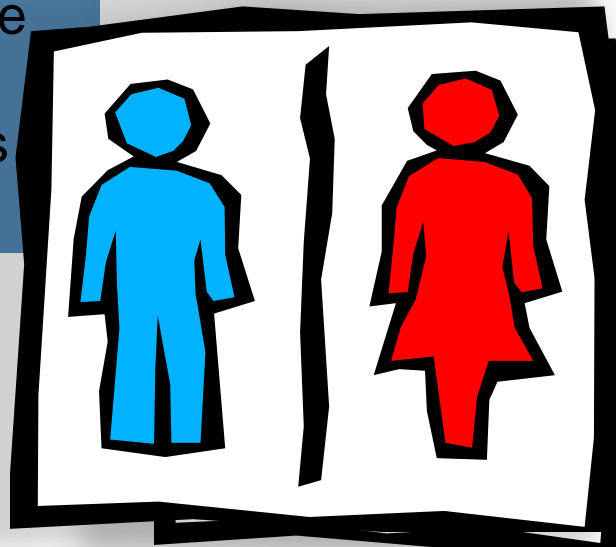
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- ❖ Incarceration is different for males and females.
- ❖ Studies have found that in a woman's life, the issues that form the foundation of female identity are **attachment, interdependence and connection.**
- ❖ In men's lives, identity is defined by **his view of self, his status in the world, independence and autonomy.**



Findings (con't)

When males are incarcerated, they are removed from their tangible belongings, status in the outside world and power. Their place in life is important to them.



When females are incarcerated, they are removed from their relationships with others (family, friends, significant others). Networks continue to be prominent in their lives, despite incarceration.

Findings (con't)

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- ❖ Generally speaking, females don't make choices simply based on right or wrong. They often make choices based on their connections and the needs of others.

**MY LIFE HAS MORE VALUE BASED ON HOW
CONNECTED I AM TO OTHERS.**

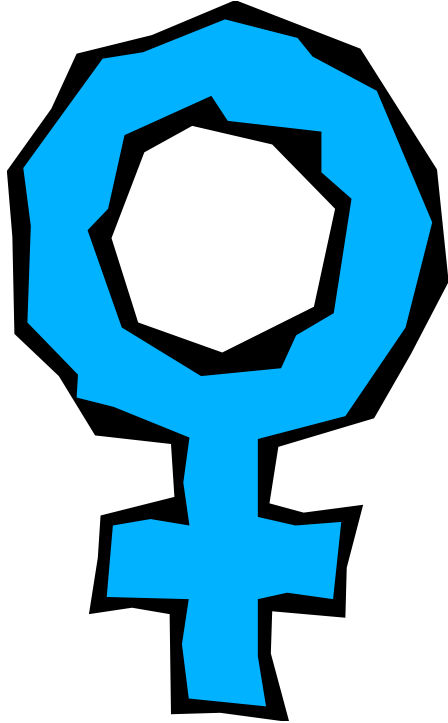
Findings (con't)

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- ❖ Females who are in abusive relationships may stay due to their need for inter-connectedness, fear of being alone and isolated.
 - ❖ Regardless of their relationship “condition”, it is viewed as better than being alone. Because they are in an abusive relationship, females become more isolated from others.
- ❖ Women may commit crimes in order to maintain relationships.
 - ❖ That need, combined with financial dependence, may keep them trapped in abusive relationships longer than women without abuse and trauma histories.

Tips for Identity Issues

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- ❖ Females tend to “get close” and may invade personal space.
- ❖ Females solve their problems by talking through issues.
- ❖ They tend to get physically close because of their need for connection.
- ❖ Understand it is natural for females to approach as a group and take on each other's causes. If this interferes with jail protocol, set the boundaries but understand the behavior.

Strategies

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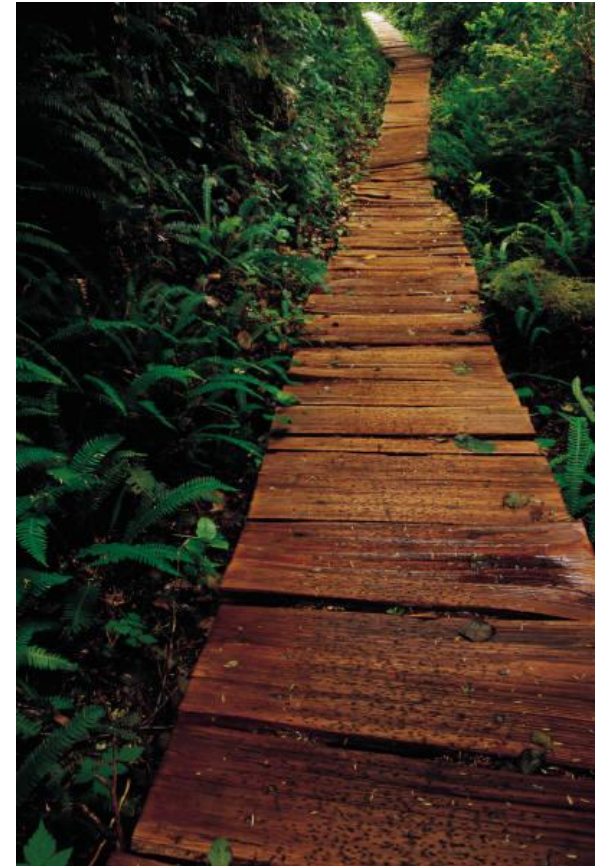
- ❖ Assist female inmates in focusing on the facts to address the situation. You may ask them to write out their concerns.
- ❖ Make time each day that staff will visit the female unit and address those specific concerns. This may help with the staff not getting inundated with questions every time they walk into the unit.
- ❖ Coach the female inmates to advocate for themselves individually rather than use the “group” approach.

Findings on Pathways to Crime

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- ❖ Four pathways intertwine to bring females into the criminal justice system:
 - Abuse
 - Poverty
 - Addiction
 - Dysfunctional Relationships

- ❖ Males experience these circumstances, also. However, when combined, these become a trajectory for females into anti-social behaviors and criminal life styles.



Findings on Trauma

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- ❖ Trauma, as experienced through incest or domestic violence, is going to happen more often and differently for females vs. males.
- ❖ Women and girls who have experienced childhood abuse often find themselves in adult relationships characterized by physical and sexual abuse.
- ❖ The ongoing abuse and trauma can result in substance abuse and criminality.



Findings (con't)

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- ❖ Males do experience childhood abuse. Many studies list similar rates between genders. Males are not as likely to be victimized in adulthood. Males tend to get bigger and can usually defend themselves against abuse.
- ❖ Between 7 to 16 percent of male offenders report childhood sexual abuse; female offenders' sexual abuse rates are 40 to 57 percent.

Tips

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- ❖ Some female inmates will misuse their sexuality while in the facility because of prior sexual abuse and/or dysfunctional relationships.
- ❖ Using sexual behavior may have worked in the past to influence their situation.
- ❖ Some female inmates have a long standing pattern of using sexual conduct to cope with their circumstances.

Strategies

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- ❖ Recognize and address sexual behavior with the inmate immediately.
- ❖ Reinforce inmate dress code rules directly, regardless of gender.
- ❖ Document incidents and apply sanctions, as appropriate.
- ❖ Alert other staff of these events.
- ❖ Always discuss incidents with your supervisor.

Findings on Emotions

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- ❖ When issues occur, females may tend to become overwhelmed and emotionally involved. That emotional response decreases when females talk about problems even though they are not immediately concerned about solutions.
- ❖ In females, stress produces a reaction in the emotional center of the brain. Talking stimulates the production of serotonin and relaxes the brain and clearer thinking begins.



Tips

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- ❖ Female inmates tend to be more verbal and may have emotional outbursts.
- ❖ Females may want to discuss issues, verbalize their problems and know that you “understand” their concerns.
- ❖ Hormonal changes and pre-menstrual syndrome may also add to strong emotional reactions for some females.

Strategies

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- ❖ When an inmate has an emotional outburst, you can tell her to take a break until she calms down. Staff can talk with her later.
- ❖ Ask her to tell you the reasons for the emotional outburst.
- ❖ Use “active listening” and reflect back what you are hearing her say.
- ❖ Understand that she may only want to talk about the issues and isn't necessarily looking for a solution.



Findings on Mental Health

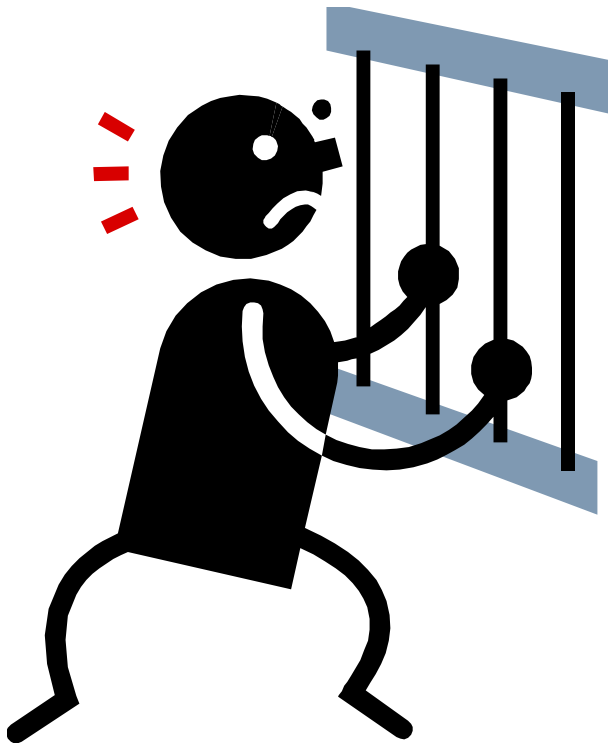
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- ❖ Research reveals that 12.2% of females in jail have **severe** psychiatric disorders.
- ❖ Most common diagnoses are post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and substance abuse.
- ❖ Common psychotic disorders include schizophrenia, major depression, anxiety, bipolar and obsessive-compulsive disorders.



Tips

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- ❖ Inmates with mental health issues may try to isolate from others.
- ❖ Sleeping issues (too much or too little) are common.
- ❖ Hygiene and self-care may be an issue for some inmates.
- ❖ Mental health conditions may cause over or under-reactions to problems or people.

Strategies

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- ❖ Set aside time for staff to listen. Use clear communication and feedback.
- ❖ Encourage female inmates not to isolate from other inmates.
- ❖ Offer recreation and other programs to increase their involvement.
- ❖ Refer inmates to health services when they exhibit severe mental health behaviors.

Findings on Security

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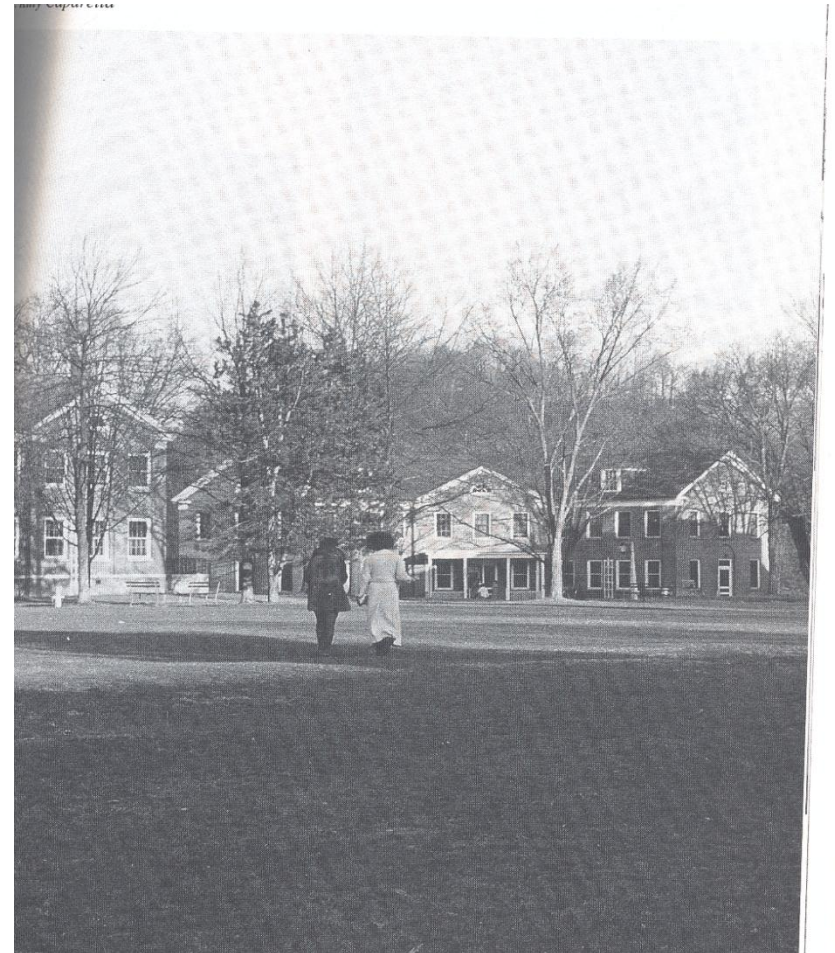
- ❖ Housing female inmates presents unique challenges.
- ❖ They have additional means to hide contraband.
- ❖ Staff may have concerns regarding working with female inmates.



Tips

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- ❖ There are often misunderstandings regarding cross-gender supervision of female inmates.
- ❖ Some staff fear they will be falsely accused of sexual misconduct or boundary infractions.



Strategies

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- ❖ Male staff may provide direct supervision of female inmates and complete well-being checks.
- ❖ Be familiar with limits to clothed and unclothed body searches.
- ❖ Distribution of hygiene items and underwear should be handled professionally or inmates may use it to make staff uncomfortable.
- ❖ Staff need to document unusual events and circumstances.
- ❖ All staff must immediately assure inmate compliance with policies requiring appropriate dress.
- ❖ Role model boundaries and communication skills with inmates.

Findings on Children

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- ❖ Recent reports state that seventy-nine percent of female inmates are mothers; most are single parents.
- ❖ Currently, it is estimated that 1.3 million minor children have a mother who is under correctional supervision.
- ❖ The number of children whose mothers are incarcerated nearly doubled between 1991 and 1999.



Tips

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- ❖ Children want/need to have contact with their mothers, regardless of incarceration.
- ❖ When female inmates are “stabilized”, they want more contact with their children.
- ❖ There are often increased contacts with other courts and county agencies (family court, child protection) in regard to female inmates.
- ❖ Children are an important outside connection for females in jail.

Children Strategies

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- ❖ Develop ways for female inmates to increase their parenting skills such as reading programs and parenting education.
- ❖ Place parenting books and resources in your library.
- ❖ Identify ways to make visits more enjoyable or welcoming for kids (toys, coloring books, puzzles, etc.) and promote frequent contact.
- ❖ Encourage female inmates to maintain contact through mailing letters, cards or making craft items for their children.



CONCLUSIONS



Conclusions

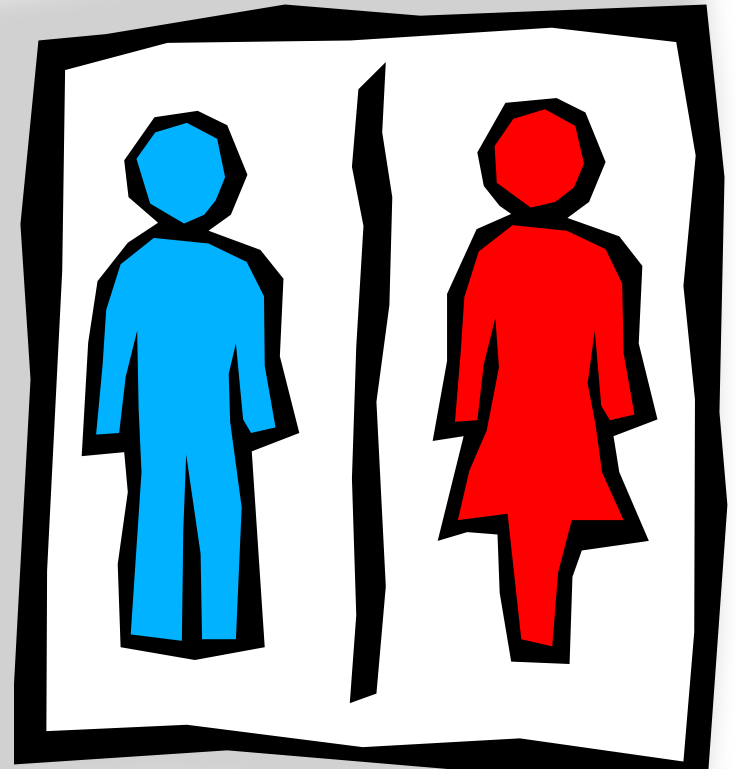
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- ❖ Providing the “Findings” on why female inmates act in particular ways may support your understanding of their behaviors.
- ❖ “Tips” and “Strategies” for dealing with female inmates may assist you in interactions – making your job easier.

Conclusions (con't)

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- ❖ The intent of the information is neither to evoke sympathy for nor to excuse criminal or destructive behavior by female inmates. Rather, it is to recognize why they do what they do.
- ❖ Understanding why their behaviors are different than males may make your responses more effective.



Conclusions (con't)

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- ❖ Open communication lines and model healthy relationships
- ❖ Be “personable” without being “personal”
- ❖ Acknowledge manipulative behaviors, recognize and acknowledge sexual innuendos
- ❖ Be professional and respectful
- ❖ Practice “empathy” and not apathy or sympathy

Contact Information

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Minnesota Advisory Task Force on the Woman and Juvenile Female Offender, Minnesota Department of Corrections at:

<https://forums.doc.state.mn.us/site/fo/default.aspx>

Or, email questions and feedback to:

FemaleOffenderTaskForce.doc@state.mn.us

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Resources and Bibliography

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